

# **TOGO 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution specifies the state is secular and protects the rights of all citizens to exercise their religious beliefs, consistent with the nation's laws. All religious groups must register with the government and apply for authorization to open places of worship. Approximately 900 registration applications from religious groups remained pending at year's end, the same as in previous years, and the government continued to refuse intake of new applications. According to the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) in the Ministry of Territorial Affairs (MTA), however, the government did not prevent these groups from opening new religious institutions and carrying out their activities informally. In response to an increase in COVID-19 cases and the refusal of some religious groups to check members for proof of vaccination, on September 17, the government ordered a suspension of religious weddings and funerals and the closure of religious establishments including churches, mosques, and voodoo temples for one month. The Togolese Conference of Bishops denounced the closure of places of worship on September 24, accusing the government of ignoring the opinion of religious authorities.

Members of different religious groups attended each other's ceremonies, and interfaith marriage remained common.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious tolerance with government officials and met with religious leaders throughout the year to support their efforts to reduce tensions in communities and support peace and social cohesion, specifically regarding countering violent extremism related to religion. The embassy continued to promote interreligious dialogue through grants to nongovernmental organizations.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.3 million (midyear 2021). According to an estimate in the 2014 General Population and Housing Census, the most recent data available, the population is 47.7 percent Christian, 33.2 percent traditional animist, 18.3 percent Sunni Muslim, and less than 1 percent followers of other religious groups. Roman Catholics are the largest Christian group, approximately 25 percent of the population, according to the Togolese Conference of Bishops. Protestant Christian groups include Methodists, Lutherans,

Assemblies of God, and Seventh-day Adventists. Other Christian groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nichiren Buddhists, followers of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha'is, and Hindus are among other religious groups in the country. There are also persons not affiliated with any religious group. Many Christians and Muslims also engage in indigenous religious and voodoo practices.

Christians live mainly in the south, while Muslims live predominately in the central and northern regions.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the country is a secular state, provides for equality before the law for all citizens regardless of religion, protects all religious beliefs, and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship; free exercise of religious belief; and the right of religious groups to organize themselves and carry out their activities consistent with the law, the rights of others, and public order.

The law requires all religious groups, including indigenous groups, to register as religious associations. Some Christian and Islamic holidays are observed as national holidays. Official recognition as a religious association provides other groups the same rights as those afforded to Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims, including import duty exemptions for humanitarian and development projects. Registering is not obligatory, but registration entitles religious groups to receive government benefits such as government-provided teachers for private schools and special assistance in case of natural disasters.

Organizations apply for registration with the DRA. A religious group must submit its statutes, statement of doctrine, bylaws, names and addresses of executive board members, leaders' religious credentials, a site-use agreement, map for religious facilities, and description of its finances. It must also pay a registration fee of 150,000 CFA francs (\$260). Criteria for recognition include authenticity of the religious leader's diploma and the government's assessment of the ethical behavior of the group, which must not cause a breach of public order. The DRA issues a receipt that serves as temporary recognition for religious groups applying for registration. The investigation and issuance of formal written authorization usually takes several years.

By law, religious groups must request permission to conduct large nighttime celebrations, particularly those likely to block city streets or involve loud ceremonies in residential areas.

The public school curriculum does not include religion classes. There are many Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic schools to which the government assigns its own paid employees as additional teachers and staff. Other registered religious groups have the right to establish schools as long as they meet accreditation standards.

The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. The law forbids private religious radio stations from broadcasting political material.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The government continued to meet with religious leaders throughout the year. Similar to previous years, the government did not act on approximately 900 pending registration applications from religious groups and has not accepted new applications since 2013. Most pending registration applications came from Christian evangelical religious movements. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the government prevented religious groups from opening new places of worship and limited public gatherings. The cabinet did not act on a bill submitted to it by the MTA in July 2019 and pending since 2018 detailing the process for opening places of worship and regulating hours of operation and levels of noise allowed during worship, and the DRA said that it was awaiting passage of the proposed law to approve pending registration applications.

In May 2019, the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection created an Interministerial Committee for Combatting and Preventing Violent Extremism (CIPLEV) to respond to violent extremist threats in the border regions. On February 13 in the Kara region, CIPLEV organized leaders from local governments, tribal groups, religious groups, media organizations, civil society, the MTA, and security forces to develop local committees, with a mandate for combatting and preventing violent extremism. CIPLEV also led discussions in September on youth engagement and social cohesion initiatives throughout the Central and Maritime Regions.

The MTA met with religious leaders to discuss the management of religious services in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the DRA convened a series of meetings with religious contacts throughout August to discuss initiatives to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections. During these meetings and in response to a spike in cases, the government requested religious establishments check for proof of vaccination prior to permitting members entrance to the religious premises. After several groups refused, on September 17, the government ordered a suspension of religious weddings and funerals and the closure of religious establishments, including churches, mosques, and voodoo temples, for one month, as part of a series of preventive measures during a severe COVID-19 outbreak. The DRA continued to meet with religious officials throughout the closure regarding the status of the continuing restrictions. The DRA granted the Archdiocese of Lome a one-week exemption from September 10 to 17 for important religious ceremonies. On September 24, the Togolese Conference of Bishops denounced the closure of places of worship, accusing the government of ignoring the opinion of religious authorities.

The government said it received several thousand complaints, some regarding the high volume-level of worship services and religious observances. The vast majority of complaints, however, dealt with the closure of religious establishments, the suspension of religious activities, and other matters, which the receiving agency proceeded to either address upon receipt or transfer to the relevant agency for response.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to religious leaders, community members complained about high volume levels from religious observances. The DRA addressed these complaints as they received them but noted limitations to its authority without the passage of the proposed law regulating religious institutions.

Despite a prohibition on large ceremonies during the pandemic, members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious groups continued to invite one another to their respective ceremonies. Marriage between persons of different religious groups remained common.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance, in particular pending legislation and registration applications, in meetings with government officials.

Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss their efforts to reduce tensions in communities and support peace and social cohesion, specifically regarding countering violent extremism related to religion.

The embassy continued to support the Togolese branch of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, administering a \$250,000 U.S. government grant, awarded in 2020, to strengthen resilience against violent extremism, with a strong focus on interreligious dialogue. In August, the U.S. government provided a grant of \$35,000 to the Togolese Muslim Leaders Association to promote the involvement of youth in the prevention of and fight against violent extremism and COVID-19 in the country.